

Challenging Behavior: Keys to Understanding

Now you are ready to begin the audio cast! You will hear a welcome, brief panel introductions, and a panel discussion. The Question and Answer session was pre-taped. The handouts in this section are for you to use as you listen to the audio cast and think about how what you hear applies to your work. Enjoy!

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The Responsive Process

J. Ronald Lally (1990), at WestEd’s Program for Infant Toddler Caregivers, developed a simple three-step process for learning about and providing nurturing, responsive care to infants and toddlers. The process recognizes the diversity of children and that children are best supported in their development by adults who can recognize and respond to their individual needs and temperaments. In this audio conference, we have adapted the Responsive Process for use in home-based and center-based programs, with children who are demonstrating behaviors that are challenging for the adults who care for them:

Watch: Observe the child – without interpreting what you see. Use all of your senses to understand what the child is experiencing. Look (and listen!) for what happens before and after behaviors of concern. Think about both the physical environment and the social environment.

Ask: Young children communicate through their behavior. Ask questions that help you understand what you have observed. Consider the following:

- **Development:** Where is the child developmentally?
- **Temperament:** What do I know about the child’s temperament (and the goodness-of-fit with mine?)
- **Physical factors:** Could the child be hungry/tired/sick?
- **Self-regulation**, defined as the ability of the child to gain mastery in controlling bodily functions, managing powerful emotions constructively, and keeping attention focused (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000): How does the child calm him or herself? What tools does the child use to express his or her emotions or needs?
- **Environment (physical and social):** What is triggering or reinforcing this behavior in the moment? Does there seem to be a pattern?
- **Home environment:** What do I know/can I learn about the home environment that can help me understand this behavior?
- **Staff, family and cultural understanding:** How do I/does the family understand/ experience/interpret/respond to this behavior? How does the wider community?

Adapt: Use the information you gather to develop a theory: What do you think the child is communicating? How can you help? Is it a matter of changing the environment? Is the behavior less challenging for you now that you understand it differently? How can you respond to that child’s need before the behavior begins? How can you help the child develop different ways of communicating the message?

Keep in mind that this is a fluid and cyclical process. Use different pieces at different times, as appropriate. And, after you adapt, always observe again to make sure that the adaptations are working! Remember, too, that children are constantly

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growing and changing. Continue to use this process, in formal and informal ways, to inform your work in providing children and their families responsive services.

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A Word about Temperament

Different children are . . .different. Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas (1986) talk about behavioral styles, or **temperament**, as an important difference among children, and certainly a critical difference in understanding and interpreting their behavior. While thinking about the temperament of a child you know will not always give you information on the messages they are communicating, it can help you understand how they are communicating their messages. This understanding can help staff and families find goodness of fit. Below are brief descriptions of nine important temperamental traits:

1. Activity Level: Does this child move a lot or a little in quiet situations? Is this child a fast or slow mover?
2. Biological Rhythms: Is this child regular or irregular when it comes to things like sleeping, eating, and going to the bathroom?
3. Approach/Withdrawal: How does this child respond to new people, new toys, new foods, new activities?
4. Adaptability: How quickly does this child adapt to change in his or her schedule or routine? How quickly does s/he adapt to new foods and new places?
5. Quality of Mood: Does this child usually use positive, cheerful behaviors or fussing and crying behaviors?
6. Intensity of Reactions: How strong are this child's reactions?
7. Physical Sensitivity: How sensitive is this child to changes in physical stimuli (like light, sound, tastes, etc.)?
8. Distractibility: Is this child easily distracted, or can s/he ignore distractions?
9. Persistence: How long does this child continue with one activity? Will s/he continue, even if it is difficult?

In the United States, these traits are commonly grouped in three temperamental types:

Flexible: The flexible child is usually regular in biological rhythms, approaches and adapts to new situations and people easily, and is usually in a positive mood. His or her reactions are low or moderate in intensity.

Feisty: This child is full of zest! The feisty child is typically irregular and often shows a negative mood of high intensity. S/he typically has a hard time with new people or situations, adapting slowly.

Cautious: A cautious child may be slow in approaching new situations, experiences and people, watching carefully before s/he takes steps to join. Like the feisty child, s/he

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may be slow to adapt, but in contrast, will express his or her negative mood slowly (and often less intensely).

Adapted from:

Chess, S. (1990). Temperaments of infants and toddlers. In, J. Ronald Lally (Ed.). *A guide to social-emotional growth and socialization*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.

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Interviews

Becky Carter-Steele uses the following two forms with parents and classroom teachers in their discussions around children with “challenging behaviors.” Adapt these for your own use in learning more about behaviors you see, to work with parents who are struggling with their children’s behaviors, or to support staff on your team.

Parent Interview

Child/Age_____

Parent(s)_____

Interviewer_____

Date_____

We are meeting today to find ways to support you and your child so that s/he is more successful. I cannot fix your child. What I can do is make suggestions to change the environment that will help your child be more successful. This interview will take about 30 minutes.

1. What are your child’s strengths?

At home_____

At childcare/school_____

2. What activities does your child like to do?

At home_____

At school_____

3. What behaviors does your child have that are challenging for you? (Prompts: aggression, tantrums, not listening)

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4. Some times of the day and some activities are easier or harder for different children. We are going to review your home routines to see if we can pinpoint the easy and challenging times of day. On a scale of one to six, with six being the highest likelihood, you will tell me the likelihood the behavior will occur at the different times. You may also tell me on a scale of one to three, with one being the highest priority, how much of a priority the challenging times are in order for us to decide which areas to address.

Schedule and Routine Matrix

At Home (Mornings)				
Time	Routine	Problem Behavior	Likelihood	Priority
	Getting up		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Breakfast		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Getting ready		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Transportation		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
<u>At Childcare/School</u>				
	Dropping Off		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Classroom		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Outside		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Picking Up		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
At Home (Evenings)				
	Transportation		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Play		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Dinner		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Bath		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Bedtime		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
	Sleeping		1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
<u>Weekends</u>				
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3

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5. Which of these behaviors occur at the same time?

6. In what order do the behaviors occur?

7. In response to what situations do the behaviors occur?

8. Which behavior is of most concern to you?

9. One of the reasons I want to talk to you is to learn about when and why you think the problem behaviors occur or do not occur. What seems to set off or trigger the behavior? (Prompts: Parent demand? Which parent? Siblings teasing? Siblings encouraging? Specific tasks? Reprimands? Transitions?)

10. What usually happens immediately after the behavior occurs?

11. What events may make a day easier or harder for your child? (Prompts: Lack of sleep? Being sick? Hunger? Trouble at childcare or school? Noise or distractions? Documented special need? Being in pain?)

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12. Let's talk about what would make the problem behavior better. Sometimes it is hard for children to do what is expected. What could your child do instead of the problem behavior that would be better than the problem behavior and would still be acceptable to you?

13. Are there things that happen at home that may make the behavior more likely to occur at childcare/school? If yes, what?

14. Are there things that happen at school that may make the behavior more likely to occur at home? If yes, what?

15. What else would you like to share that may help us in developing our behavior plan?

**Adapted by Addressing Behavioral Challenges
from Positive Behavior Support Nevada Manual, 2004.**

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Interviews (cont’d.)

Teacher Interview

Child/Age_____ Teacher(s)_____

Interviewer_____ Date_____

We are meeting today to find ways to support you and the children in your classroom, particularly _____ so that s/he is more successful. I cannot fix the child. What I can do is make suggestions to change the environment that will help the child be more successful. This interview will take about 30 minutes.

1. What are the child’s strengths?

2. Which of the following behaviors are you seeing that are challenging?

_____Late arrival	_____Aggression	_____Fighting
_____Unresponsive	_____Inappropriate Language	_____Disruptive
_____Withdrawn	_____Verbal Harassment	_____Self-Injury
_____Theft	_____Vandalism	_____Other_____

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3. Some times of the day and some activities are easier or harder for different children. We are going to review the classroom routines to see if we can pinpoint the easy and challenging times of day. On a scale of one to six, with six being the highest likelihood, you will tell me the likelihood the behavior will occur at the different times. You may also tell me on a scale of one to three, with one being the highest priority, how much of a priority the challenging times are in order for us to decide which areas to address.

Schedule and Routine Matrix

Time	Routine	Problem Behavior	Likelihood	Priority
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
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			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3
			1 2 3 4 5 6	1 2 3

4. What does the problem behavior look like in detail?

5. How often during the day does the problem behavior occur during the day?

6. What is the intensity or level of danger when the behavior is occurring?

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7. What events predict when the behavior will occur? (Prompts: Child is sick. Conflict at home. Reprimand. Physical demands. Child with peers. Structured activities. Unstructured activities. Activity too long.)

8. What does the child get or get to avoid from the behavior? (Prompts: Adult attention. Peer attention. Preferred activity. Time alone. Reprimand. Physical effort.)

9. What strategies have you tried and for how long? (Prompts: Schedule change. Room change. Room rearrangement. Curriculum change. Reprimand. Time out. Call parents.)

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